Neeta Das

PAIN

The story of a family as it unfolds, celebrating a life of togetherness, and the pain of loss through cancer and covid.

INTRODUCTION

This is a tribute to my late parents Dr. Y.C. Agarwal and Mrs. Kusum Agarwal and to celebrate their lives.

After my parents died, it was difficult to bear the pain of their loss, my emotions and childhood memories clouded my mind, and I felt compelled to write and express my feelings. In addition to recording for posterity the immeasurable love and kindness of our parents, this memoir is a testament to their struggles in bringing up three daughters in an 'oppressive' and patriarchal society, and giving us and themselves, a respectful place and show a new way forward to others with daughters. They succeeded very well in making us as good as men. However, I sometimes feel, in the effort to become a 'man', I lost out on being a 'woman', who enjoyed dressing up or being ‘feminine’. I felt I failed my parents in some way by not being able to be man enough to light their funeral pyre, and my nephew had to do it.

The life of my father as a Cancer professional, who was himself diagnosed with cancer in the later stage of his life, took a 'rational' view of cancer and cancer treatment, and always believed that the body was a machine and would one day perish, flashed before my eyes. He dealt with himself in the same way he dealt with his patients. As he had always preached, he chose palliative treatment as a way to end his life rather than use life-saving methods to prolong life. Our mother had the same understanding of life, and could easily embrace death. Finally, of course, is the expression of the pain of loss, of our parents, our family unit, our childhood,; our safety and security, and the feeling of being orphaned. Our parents shielded us from all pain. It was only after my father’s death that we found the cancer had reached his brain. He did not tell us lest we worry or get upset. Today, as we are parents ourselves, mother and father stand out as examples of what a parent should be and as we think back on their lives we hope to be able to give to our children a little of what they gave to us.

Neeta Das, 2022

PROLOGUE

We waited for our brother-in-law, a doctor, to arrive and declare father dead. We wanted to be sure, very sure, that he was gone. The last few hours had passed in a blur of preparations being made for his cremation. Coming from a household of women, we were asked if we wanted to perform the last rites which are usually done by a son or a grandson. None of us could face the prospect of setting our beloved father on fire. A daughter is a daughter and cannot be a son. So one of the brave grandsons had to grow up in a hurry and fulfil this duty. I shall remain eternally grateful to him. Even though I had wanted to be a 'son' for my Papa, in the end I failed. There was a large gathering for the last rites; family members, friends, colleagues, hospital staff, neighbours, acquaintances; Papa had touched many people during his humble life.

As the body was being taken away, the pathologist from Papa's hospital came up to offer us condolences. She said she couldn't believe his last report when he came for the biopsy. The cancer had reached his head. He knew that was the last stage, which explained his acceptance of the morphine patch. He knew his end was near. But he did not tell any of us of the biopsy results. Usually, my sisters would sneak out the results of his tests before he got them. But not this time. I nursed the bruise of the biopsy on his head everyday for three weeks and I did not know what it was. His love for us was far greater than his love for himself. He knew that we would have been shattered with the news. So he took his pain with him to his pyre. He taught us to live and die, for others.

Papa's eldest grandson gave him a fitting send off with the final words: 'A dutiful son, a loving brother, a devoted husband, a doting father, and an adoring grandfather.' These are not the only aspects that completed the personality of our father, Dr Y.C. Agarwal. Born in Lucknow he completed his double M.Sc. in Physics and Mathematics at the University there. He told us he was very good at Mathematics and would get full marks in his exams. However, since his marks in Chemistry were not very good he decided to repeat his post graduation in Physics to get better grades. He went on to complete his PhD in Medical Physics and started his research with cancer. He belonged to an educated and well respected family of Lucknow.

He began his career in the JK Cancer Institute in Kanpur Medical College, teaching and engaging with patients suffering with cancer. Therein he learnt the realities of life and pain and death. He counseled the family members of these patients and explained these realities to them. After nearly five decades of working with cancer, the disease that he treated hit him. Initially he was a broken man because he knew what was in store for him. However, not one to believe in God or destiny, he had only himself to trust in. He remembered all the lessons that he had learnt, picked himself up and went back to work. For fifteen years he braved the disease. On his 86th birthday, 2nd April 2016, he was given the Life time achievement award from Indian Society of Medical Physicists from the Governor of Uttar Pradesh as a cancer survivor and for tirelessly working for cancer patients.

More than anything else, he was a fighter. He worked till the last day of his conscious life. The cancer did not defeat him. Finally he decided that he had led a complete life and that this was it. He lay down on an eternal fast, giving up food and drink, and like a true Indian rishi gave up his mortal body at home, surrounded by his family and friends. Even in death, he taught us about life. That life is to be lived, to enjoy what it offers and for the service of others. My mother lived barely three years after his death. They had a companionship of sixty years. But unlike our Papa, she did not give us any chance to serve her or be prepared for her death. She went away suddenly, with many others, during the Covid pandemic of 2020/21.

IN THE CITY OF THE TAJ, AGRA

They say it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. These are meaningless words unless one has been loved intimately and then suddenly one day, that person who you loved so dearly is no more. What is left is a big void in your heart filled by a dull ache that does not seem to go away. Several years have passed since our Papa died but we can't get over the loss. I say we, because we are three sisters, who had but one heart, Papa. In a last attempt to confront the reality of his passing away, and in the hope that it will somehow reduce the pain, and immortalise him in our hearts, I am writing this memoir.

Our grandfather was a secretary with the British government and was very proud of the fact that he could type with his eyes closed. His English was impeccable, like most men of his times. He had two persona, one when he was at home and one when he went out. At home Baba, as we called our grandfather, would wear a white dhoti over a strange under garment called a langouti, loin cloth. This would be paired with a white kurta or shirt. But when he stepped out he would be dressed in trousers (patloon, as they were called) and coat, complete with a tie and a hat. Our grandmother, Ammaji, on the other hand was a Hindi speaking, saree clad, beautiful woman, in more ways than one, and loved by one and all.

Papa had two brothers. One became a doctor and the other, like him, was a scientist. He also had two sisters, both younger than him. Papa would often tell us about their childhood when they would all sit on the floor of the kitchen in a line as Ammaji, also sitting on the floor, would cook and serve them with fresh rotis. They each had their own room in the large courtyard house in Narhi, Lucknow. Much would happen in this house over the next six decades.

Just nearby was an older house, similar in design, called the Bara Ghar, or big house. It was from here that Ammaji had come as a bride. She would tell us of her strict mother-in-law who would keep a strict eye on all the daughters-in-law lest they loiter around or spend 'romantic' times with their husbands. The only free time they were allowed was when they

nursed their babies, which Ammaji said would be more often than needed! Also, they could only go to their bedrooms when all the work was finished, including massaging their mother-in-law's feet, which they would do often nodding off to sleep, until she permitted them to go and rest.

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After completing his post-graduation, Papa got a job as a physicist in the Medical College at Agra and he got married. In India it is very common for boys to get married for reasons other than love; once a family's sons have got jobs and there is no one to keep the mother company, a daughter-in-law is the solution. If the mother has not been keeping well and cannot do all the housework, a daughter-in-law is needed to help out with the chores. And if one of the sons has been posted to another city because of his job and there is no one to take care of him, the obvious solution is to get him a wife. It was probably this last reason why Papa got married. Black and white photographs of him as a bachelor show him to be lanky, with loose trousers, half sleeve shirts, a head full of hair (which we never saw), and his endearing smile which persisted till his last days.

Unlike Papa, our mother came from a business-class family. Our maternal grandfather, Nanaji, was the only professional, being a lawyer, and later, like most lawyers of his time, a freedom fighter who went to jail with Mahatma Gandhi. He was from a town called Bangarmau in Uttar Pradesh, but had moved to Kanpur maybe for work. The rest of his family continued to run the family business producing edible oils. People of this family, which I like to call having the 'Bangarmau' gene, are very lazy, very slow in taking decisions, and with luxurious lifestyles but not very sophisticated taste.

Much later in life I would come to realise that we all belong to a clan of the Marwari Agarwals, a business community from the deserts of Rajasthan, that migrated far and wide as traders and later businessmen. My Nani, maternal grandmother, belonged to a rich business family of sarafs, jewellers who often made their riches from money lending. Nani never found our ornaments good enough, and our mother didn't either for that matter,

since the gold and silver jewellery she owned were in kilograms, whereas ours were in milligrams. Amma, as we called our mother, recalls how her maternal uncle would come to their house, dressed in ordinary dhoti kurta, with a potli, or cloth bundle and to the delight of the nieces it would be full of heavy jewellery for them to choose from. Even today, it is difficult to judge the wealth of a Marwari by their humble clothes and lifestyle. In the olden days, we are told, it was a safety measure from being robbed when they moved with money and jewellery. Most of the Marwari wealth was converted into jewellery that adorned the women who continued to be in purdah.

Papa says he would not have recognised his wife's mother, Nani, if he had met her because he did not see her face for many, many years after his marriage. Nani and my aunts by marriage would always be in purdah, that is, their faces covered by their saree when they served him food. Coming from an Anglicised family, Papa always said he felt the system to be very old fashioned and for some reason, insulting as if insinuating that he had bad intentions towards the women of the family. Needless to say, my mother, or any of us were completely free to roam around as we wished, of which we took full advantage, much to the dismay of our more conservative relatives.

My mother and father were second or third cousins, and such marriages are common within closed communities like ours. Amma says her family was very happy since she was getting married into an educated and professional family, which was not very common among the Agarwals. But coming from a purdah household, her face being veiled with a saree, and never having seen Papa except maybe in a photograph, she had a tough time trying to identify him, and more so because he and his brother looked almost identical. Amma, however, never liked my father's looks. She was very tall, fair, and pretty with a 'sharp' nose. She always found Papa to be too frugal with his wordsand that he never complimented her on her height. To her dismay, none of her daughters got her looks or 'nose'. She moved with Papa to Agra and was not very happy. She came from a large joint family of four brothers and two sisters, and here she had to live all alone. She is the only person I have known who cried every time her mother-in-law left.

It was a custom in those days that the parents of a daughter would not stay or eat at her place after she got married, a custom my Nani continued till her last days despite Papa

explaining to her, cajoling her, or even scolding her towards the end. My mother continued to compensate us, being daughters, with money or in gift in kind every time she visited. As I have two daughters, I am trying my level best to eradicate this custom although, to be very honest, it creeps into my mind now and again. So Amma was a sad bride when she came to Agra, very homesick and lonely. Papa, on the other hand had been a happy bachelor, with good friends who met every evening for a game of bridge and 'tandoori chicken', quite a feat coming from a pure vegetarian family. We never really knew if he ever touched alcohol. Whenever we asked he would only respond with a beatific smile. But he always gave us his company when we held parties, with his 'coke on the rocks'.

Amma says he continued his evening escapades even after they got married and would often lock her inside the house. Knowing him, it was probably so as not to disturb her when he came in late, but in our mother's version it sounded very harsh and inconsiderate. In my father's defence, we had once chanced on a collection of very romantic letters written by him to our mother, so he couldn't have been as insensitive as she made him out to be. But whatever transpired between them, we never saw our father, whom we used to call Papa as kids or when we felt extra childish, touching cards or having any form of non-vegetarian food although he never objected to us eating or playing what we liked. Every year after Diwali, the family would assemble, young and old, and play cards, a ritual among the Agarwals, all except Papa who would sit and observe us with a benign yet inscrutable expression on his face. He never judged those who played and he never repented his decision to stop.

Some time later my elder sister was born, and I followed soon after. We are just a year and half apart from each other. Stories from our parents supported by the black and white photographs in our family albums describe our childhood. My sister was a chubby, fair and beautiful child who would often slip into the neighbour's house, climb onto their dining table, and finish off their butter, which in those days came in small paper packets. Also, Papa used to tell us how she would climb the stairs and with every step tell him 'Papa I am coming', a story that he could never tell without tears welling up in his eyes. She was indeed the apple of my father's eye. No one really remembers much about when I was baby because a second girl child in quick succession was not something to celebrate, especially

in the 'good old days.' To add fuel to the fire, Papa was away training at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Bombay to be an atomic scientist, and my mother had to deal with a naughty one year old and a new baby alone. I am sure she had a rough time but she said her gynaecologist was very competent and Papa's friends took good care of her.

Five years later, in the hope of a son, my little sister was born, but as my mother philosophically said, the third is always a girl! So technically, I was the only disappointing girl child although I can today say with conviction that my parents never brought me up showing any sort of discrimination and even on the last day my sisters could not get out a definitive answer on whom Papa loved the most. But other than our Papa's heart we sisters share two other things - a male gynaecologist (I add that here because it sheds some light on the unconventional thinking of my parents), and the birthplace in our passports – Agra in Uttar Pradesh.

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All I remember about Agra is a very large meadow behind our house and I am holding a goat. Everything else is conjured from what we heard and saw in photographs. It would seem we visited all the famous monuments of Agra. We have pictures with the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, and Sikandra as we visited them with our cousins, always with a picnic hamper. Even in later years, we would travel every year to historic places as a family and I would like to believe that my love for history and architecture and travel was a result of my early childhood. Agra in those days was a small city with narrow streets but we never heard mention of it being dirty or polluted as it is today. Papa had fond memories of his work at the hospital where he said he was very popular since he could fix most electrical and electronic equipment. He believed in science, research, repair, and maintenance. I would hear him talk about the virtues of repair over replacement, conservation and sustainability, an ideology that I would carry with me in my life. Papa was promoted from Lecturer to a Reader, or Associate Professor as they are called today, and we moved from Agra to the J.K. Cancer Institute, a part of the G.S.V.M. Medical College, Kanpur. This is where his tryst with cancer started.

CAWNPORE, OR BETTER KNOWN AS KANPUR

Khanpore, Kanhpoor, Khanhpoor, or Cawnpore? In early records it is spelled in many ways and is composed of two words, 'Kanh', an abbreviation of Kanhaiya, a name for Krishna, and 'pur', a village or small town. According to another source it was founded in 1750 by a zamindar named Kanh, and was a hamlet of about 3,000 people with a palace and bathing ghats along the river Ganges. By 1778 it had become a regular cantonment for the English East India Company and played a major role in the First war of Independence of 1857. By1858, Cawnpore bounced back as the biggest trade centre of north India and came to be called the 'Manchester of the East.' Today Kanpur is a decaying city with roads strewn with garbage and irregular power supply making it almost unbearable to live in. However, while we in Kanpur, we were blissfully unaware of its glorious past or its doomed future. I would learn about its history and importance much later in life.

When we lived there, Kanpur was a city with big 'Company baghs,' and exposed red-brick buildings like the house of my maternal grandparents, my own home and those of my school friends, and the stage where the act of my childhood was played. Our life was comfortably cocooned from the hustle and bustle of the industrial city within the safe confines of the green and large medical college campus, in a big house, or that is how I remember it. The campus housed the doctors and support staff along with the student hostels and the institutes. Just outside the periphery were the hospitals and the bare minimum of necessary shops.

My earliest memories of childhood are of being surrounded by my parents, an elder sister and a baby sister, my paternal grandparents, and a stray relative who was always there to complete the family. After retirement, our grandparents stayed with us and we often had cousins and uncles from smaller towns and cities, who would visit or stay for a short period of time for work or studies. We also had our fair share of servants and helpers.

Life revolved around going to school (a German missionary convent of St Mary's), in a school bus which meandered through the winding streets of the colonial city and the large

cantonment of Kanpur, but on the fringes of the main crowded inner core. So we never really had a taste of Kanpur and I would merrily daydream, hanging out from the bus window, my hair blowing in the wind.

Our school had a large green campus in the cantonment and I remember spending a lot of time standing outside the class-room, appreciating the large trees, having too often been punished for being impudent. Sometimes I would slip out and climb my favourite tree, and hide there till the class was over. If it was the rainy season, I would be found collecting ladybugs and earthworms, and even fireflies in small bottles or in my tiffin box. In school I had few friends and was not fond of reading or writing until I reached the tenth grade. I busied myself in playing every available sport as it offered a good excuse to stay outdoors and not study.

At home I was sandwiched, even in bed, by my two sisters, who slept on either side of me, suffocated under the weights of their heavy legs. Model daughters, their presence did not improve my unruly tomboy image at home in front of my parents or guests. But on the sly, they would always gang up together against me, and I firmly believe that it was this behaviour on their part that has made me very strong and as I like to believe, almost invincible to outside forces - which would be boys in the very near future! The only exception to this rule was when my elder sister and myself conspired and cunningly coerced our baby sister into parting with her pocket money to support our petty interests, like buying a music record which she, poor thing, had no interest in.

Food and meals were the central theme in our house. From the moment we woke up we would hear discussions of the elaborate planning of menus that would have to satisfy three forever-hungry children, the delicate stomachs of two seniors, but fancy enough for the in-house guest, and of course healthy enough to be served to the head of the family, our Papa. Only now, after having become a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law myself, do I regret never having cared about our mother's choice. In fact, I don't remember ever having seen what was on her own plate.

Papa would sit at the head of the table, with the three of us, and our grandparents. Our mother would always be serving us hot food as the cook prepared the rotis in the kitchen. It

was customary in our house, and still is among most Marwari families, despite having servants, that the women of the family always serve the food. We had a few other rules in our house. One was not to waste food, so we had to eat everything or when Papa was not looking, transfer the remains to a willing recipient. The other rule which we were very conscientious about was that the person who left the table last would have to clear the table. This rule made sure we finished our food fast and left the table. In hindsight, I wonder if it was our parents' ploy to get us to eat all that was put on our plates? Anyway, our mother was the last to eat, with no one serving her, except the servants maybe, and cleaning up afterwards.

Once the morning session was over, our parents usually had a siesta. This was the time when we quietly slipped into our grandparents' room in search of something exciting to eat or trying to pester our grandma to make us something nice to eat. Our parents were strict disciplinarians and we did not have much choice or courage to ask for 'junk' food, but our grandma happily made up for this. She was an excellent cook and very tender hearted. So we all ended up as being very spoilt, especially as girls, never helping in the kitchen, eating to our hearts' content, and without a care in the world. Five decades back, it was luxury that very few girls had. We entered adulthood not knowing how to cook, serve, or till date, sit until the end of a family meal at a dining table!

In the absence of television and the internet, afternoon was a time to play outdoors. I don't know what my sisters did, but I spent most of my time playing with the boys of the neighbourhood. On a cool day we would play cricket; during the monsoons we would play a very dangerous game, called geti where one had to throw a small metal piece, shaped like a javelin, into the soft earth, while all the time wading through the muddy pathway. Other times I would fly kites, play marbles, or gulli danda, another game where one had to hit a small wooden stick with another. Sometimes I would play hopscotch with my sisters and other girls. My choice of company was always a concern for my mother because as I grew older, not only was it 'not proper' for a girl to mingle openly with boys, my friends were usually not the most decent or studious.

One afternoon I had spent a whole time driving around with 'my gang' and switching off the electrical mains of every house on the campus. Another day we were attacked with an

air pistol and the bullet, or pellet really, which just closely missed us. As I grew older, my 'boy friends' (although I thought of them as friends who were boys), would come home and spend long hours with me. My parents and sisters would drop polite hints that it was mealtime, or that we had go out, but it usually fell on deaf ears! During most of my growing up years I have been counselled by every wise 'aunty' and relative whom my mother could convince to talk to me. But nothing really worked and I stayed a rebel, and was written off as a very 'difficult child'.

Although I was rebellious child, I always idealised my father. Even though in times when girls were largely unwanted and treated as second-class citizens, and because there was no boy in the family, we enjoyed a unique status of 'equality' and freedom. Also, Papa always told us that he had three sons and not three daughters, which meant we were given the best food (yes, girls in our times were not given several things to eat), the best education, and were allowed to dream. Papa's dream was to see us as professionals driving our own cars to work! I took my Papa's words very seriously and would spend the rest of my life becoming an ideal son, which was not very difficult given the fact that I was a tomboy anyway.

Papa had a great belief in education and he took our studies very seriously. He would personally supervise our education and as a result we all have a very sound academic base, especially in science and mathematics because of his excellent tutoring. With his encouragement, our mother also completed her double masters, in psychology and education. We saw him diligently working on his doctoral thesis for a very long time. His research subject was related to the effect of radiation on albino mice. From the results I know it was induced cancer.

In the evenings after tea, and sometimes after dinner, I would go with Papa to the hospital to his research lab which was full of white mice in cages. Mice of all ages. They had to be fed with small feeding bottles and kept in a controlled temperature. The place would stink, but my love for animals was greater and I would lovingly help my Papa feed all the little ones. Some larger mice had odd shaped tumours which I later learnt were induced malignant cancers. I also learnt, much later in life, that all the mice, thousands of them,

had been culled, as is customary for lab specimens. Sometimes it is difficult to imagine my kind-hearted, animal-loving father involved in such a heinous act of violence.

Papa would wake up early in the morning at the crack of dawn to work on his thesis. I remember very vividly, the labour that goes in writing a dissertation without a computer and 'delete', 'backspace', 'rewrite' facilities. Every edited page had to be painfully re-written and every typed out page with errors had to be re-typed. But he continued to do this patiently every morning, the dictionary and thesaurus by his side. As I write this piece, I turn on the wi-fi to access the dictionary or thesaurus, and thank the inventor for the ease, then grumble as I surf other completely useless stuff! My drawing and craft skills were employed to add neat diagrams and graphs to his thesis report, made in triplicate! But he was always very excited and proud of my drawing and would busy himself running around and handing me the scissors, colours, gum, and fancy paper, all which he had collected for the occasion.

His love for stationery, and electrical and electronic equipments, would keep him engaged. He would help us with our school projects, and later college projects, and many years later still, the projects of our children or with exhibition posters and camps in fetes. His research in 'medical physics' or rather applied physics, earned him a doctorate and he became, Dr. Y. C. Agarwal, a name by which he was known all his life (although his family continued to call him Jatish, not Yatish). His work by now had become completely associated with oncology and his duties included the running of the radiation machines, sourcing the radioactive material from BARC, and helping calculate doses for the patients. My knowledge of radioactive and the Geiger-Müller counter came from my visits to my father's hospital office. I loved watching him work. He could be seen working with his white coat and the radiation monitoring badge, something he was very particular about, for himself and for all those who entered the radioactive zone.

I would spend as much time as I could with him, even at home helping him repair electrical things, preparing soil for his flowerpots, watching as he replaced the tyre of his scooter, or changed a lightbulb, and even wire plugs. After all, I was a son, and I had to learn all the things men did. I never indulged in any feminine activity like giggling, wearing pink, or applying nail polish. It was beneath my dignity to be chaperoned as a 'girl' and I had willed

my mind to be scared of nothing at all. So when all the girls, including my sisters took biology, which in my mind was what girls studied (clearly with so many doctors around me, I had not thought this through!), despite the best efforts of my Papa to persuade me otherwise, I took mathematics, physics, and chemistry; like him. I never told anyone that I swoon at the sight of a bottle of blood and I am petrified of dissecting anything, animal or human, dead or alive. I liked the purity of sciences and the creativity of the arts, which led me to architecture.

One had to wade through a sea of humanity to reach my father's office in the hospital. He would answer all my queries about these people. They were here because someone in their family had cancer. They came from distant villages so the whole family would camp in the hospital premises as there was nowhere else for them to stay. Most of these patients would die since they came to the hospital at a very late stage of cancer. They would sell their land and mortgage everything they had trying to pay off the medical bills despite the fact that the patient was surely going to die. The family members, mostly illiterate, would rue that taking a patient to hospital was a sure way of killing people.

Death and its discussion in our family was a common parlance, with Papa always philosophizing that everyone who is born has to die and Cancer, he said, is one of the reasons for death. However, he said, it could be treated if it was diagnosed in the early stages, but lack of awareness and the quality of food available to the poor patients did not help matters. He was always concerned about the ignorance of people about cancer and he would actively participate in counselling people, setting up cancer camps, and making sensitisation posters, most of which I drew. They were ugly posters of tumours and private parts. Papa was not a prude and he did not even bat an eyelid as he made me draw breasts. On the contrary he educated me on how one should regularly inspect the body for nodal growths and be vigilant about old and nagging sores which could become malignant.
Our cocooned, happy, and carefree life continued in Kanpur and we went to college and moved out of our home; only returning during vacations, to see our grandparents grow old, and eventually pass away. Papa continued to assist friends and distant family members who had any medical ailments, and some stayed with us as he supervised their treatment. He took special care of my mother's father and mother when they grew old and sick, going everyday after work to assist with their every need. The only time we saw him cry over

cancer was when my maternal uncle, to whom he was very close, died. I couldn't do anything for my little brother, he kept saying.

There were no other cancer casualties in our close family, even though we always knew if someone had cancer. They thought it was their duty to keep us informed. It was our thing, cancer. He retired as Professor and Oncology Medical physicist from the Department of Radiology, which according to him, attracted the worst medical students. However, he was proved wrong about this by his own grandson, who joined Radiology after coming top in the medical exams. In five decades, the incidence of cancer has multiplied manifold, but was matched by advances in its treatment. This change also ensured a comfortable retired life for Papa and he continued to work until the last day of his life. Every death needs a medical reason, his was cancer.

THE FAMILY REASSEMBLES IN LUCKNOW

Life continued in Kanpur with all of us slowly moving out to go to college and all of us were married and settled by the time our father retired from government service and joined a private hospital in Bareilly. My elder sister had been the first to move out of Kanpur when she joined the medical college in Lucknow to pursue her career in dental sciences. I soon followed and went to Ahmedabad to join an architecture college. All the while Papa would be busy escorting us to and from our colleges. Whereas my sister lived with our uncle in Lucknow, I stayed in a hostel.

My joining architecture, which was a nascent branch in the early eighties, and moving to Ahmedabad, an unknown city on the other side of India, and staying in a hostel was a leap of faith for my parents, which only rare people would have done for girls in those days, and none in a Marwari family. My train to and from Ahmedabad would cross Kanpur in the middle of the night. My Papa, in the heat of summer and the biting cold of winter, would reach the station early and wait on a hard railway platform bench for the train to arrive or depart. He would then wait for the dawn, since it was not safe to travel at night, to go home.

Once my elder sister completed her graduation course, she got married and moved to Chandigarh, where she had a baby . Since she continued her education after marriage, it was decided that her baby would stay with our parents in Kanpur while she completed her post-graduation. So an overflowing red bundle of joy was delivered to our family from the arms of a weary mother. The first grandchild, a boy, after a long wait, lit up our Kanpur home and our lives. My family and especially Papa doted on him and had we not objected, he would have continued to call him ‘Papa’ instead of the customary ‘Nana’. The shopkeepers and visitors would look perplexed when Papa went with our younger sister and nephew, both calling him ‘Papa’! Meanwhile I too got married and moved to Bombay.

I was the first to move to Lucknow when my husband got a government posting in an architecture college. The next to join me after marriage was my younger sister. As terrorism hit Punjab, and therefore Chandigarh, my elder sister’s family also relocated to

Lucknow. The last to join us were our parents, with Papa relocating to join a private cancer hospital. Thus, after nearly a decade, our family reassembled in Lucknow. Five more children were added to the family, with each sister having two children, a total of three boys and three girls. With doting grandparents and loving aunts and uncles, our children grew up amongst much love and laughter with lavish birthday parties, picnics, and sleep overs.

As adults we got busy with our careers as our parents took care of the children, as and when babysitting was required. Papa continued his hospital schedule as before in a cancer hospital. He would pick up the children from school when needed, take care of all our medical needs, advise us on our finances and investment, fuss over us when we were sick or depressed, and as in our childhood, we were happy and carefree, our lives revolving blissfully around our father and mother. Every so often the five of us would gather, and spend happy hours chatting and gossiping as our parents pampered us, oblivious to our own growing families and the miseries of other people until one day when Papa was advised colonoscopy.

My brother-in-law is a doctor and worked in the SGPGI of Medical Sciences. He fixed an appointment with the gastroenterologist and I accompanied Papa to the hospital. After a lot of paperwork, Papa went on the examination table. For a person who was not afraid of hospitals and sickness, he seemed a little nervous. On my asking he replied that he felt all was not right with him. Having worked closely with cancer, he had a suspicion that the cause of his discomfort might be a tumour, a hunch that was soon confirmed. We drove back in silence, the biopsy report would come a few days later to confirm that the tumour was malignant, stage two. Papa was 72 years old at this time.

Within days Papa was operated upon and the tumour was removed. This would be followed by chemotherapy to eradicate any errant cancer cells. Following this episode, Papa would religiously go every year for his PET exam, a full body scan that would detect the reoccurrence of any cancer as secondaries. We were always nervous, but methodical and scientific, he took his exams religiously and patiently. He continued to eat his prescribed supplements which would help him re-build his lost cells. Prevention was better

than cure and early detection of cancer was the best way to overcome it. He practiced what he preached.

After nearly five years, the cancer resurfaced in the liver; metastasis, they called it, or 'secondaries' as Papa would explain. These were cancerous cells that had travelled away from the original site of cancer. The way cancer killed, was by spreading to the various parts of the body; organs, bones, and finally the head and brain. An organ had been affected. While the liver is an organ that can re-grow to replace any lost tissues, the affected area could not be operated upon. The oncologist gave him a stronger chemotherapy schedule and three months to live. The first three days of the chemo cycle were intravenous so he had to be admitted to the hospital. He refused to go to any other, or better hospital. He wanted to be treated where he worked.

He would first discuss his medicine schedule, side effects, and their efficacy with the doctors and when satisfied would go ahead and order them. When they arrived, he would finalise his appointment and reach there early. He would go to his chamber, finish his work of assigning the dosage for his patients, and other works; collect syringes, medicines, and other items needed for the chemotherapy before going to the private ward assigned to him where he would get ready for treatment. Most of the time, we sisters and our mother would only arrive much later, more to provide company than to do anything useful. We would usually find him in a hospital gown, his arm attached to the long tube of the saline bottle through which the medicines were being injected, with reading glasses, and a writing desk on his lap, surrounded by the hospital staff; engaged in his regular official work!

He would look at us from above the glasses, since his long-distance sight was perfect and he wore glasses only for reading, greet us with a smile and ask us to sit while he finished his work. Once done he would ask us about our own work and family then fuss over us, directing our mother to feed us this and that. My mother is always prepared and never moves without a good supply of delicious eatables. Growing up in a pure vegetarian household, and having married into a non-vegetarian Bengali family, I now realise the basic difference in life-styles. Since Marwaris are 'militantly' vegetarian, and they were originally a nomadic tribe, they always carry food with a long shelf life. A lot of it has to do with not eating food that has been 'touched' by a non-vegetarian person, someone of lower

caste, or stirred by a spoon which was previously used for stirring a meat dish. I think my mother was also used to her children, even when they were fifty, to be perpetually hungry!

Slowly the medicines would start making Papa drowsy and sluggish. We would take turns in coaxing food into him and then tucking him in so that he would then fall asleep comfortably. The chemotherapy sessions gave us sisters and our mother a legitimate reason to assemble and we would make full use of the time, chatting, eating, and catching up. Our father never made us feel that there was anything to worry about or that he was in pain. He looked completely at peace in 'his' hospital, surrounded by people he loved. He would be discharged at the end of the day and we would drive him home, see that he was comfortable, and go to our respective homes.

The three rounds of chemotherapy slowly took their toll on Papa's health. The cells once destroyed, would not regenerate. General recovery was slower. Organs would become sluggish. The skin became blackish and more sensitive. His appetite waned but he would battle through the food since he knew that his body needed nourishment to survive the onslaught of the medicines, not so much the cancer. He would show us and explain all these symptoms in a clinical, detached fashion. He would also predict the changes that would happen next; to his eyes, hearing, and other bodily functions. Since Papa was always in command and on top of the disease, we usually ended up joking about his symptoms and side effects: 'But Papa, you have not lost a single hair like the other cancer patients!' Papa was mostly bald and had very fine hair around the side of his head; however, he would oil it regularly, wash it, and take considerable effort to comb and maintain it for a clean appearance. His visits to the barber, which we never really understood, given the fact that his hair never really grew long, were regular and planned. All medicines do not have same side effects, he told us. And then not everyone could afford the treatment he was getting, since it was very expensive and therefore had less side effects than others.

All chemotherapy has serious side effects, but it suppressed the growth of cancer cells Papa said seriously, and so was the only cure. Cancer is the rapid multiplication of unwanted cells, this is the definition he would give lay persons. Slowly his energy depleted and when earlier he would walk five kilometres every morning, these reduced to a few steps after the chemotherapy. However, whereas the doctor had given him only three

months to live, our mother's care, his own personal health regime, and the love of his family prolonged his life to another five years. Much weaker, but always peaceful and cheerful, he continued his life, which included going to the hospital, now with a driver as we refused to let him drive after eighty, coming home, taking care of his health, watching television, and socially engaging with his own brothers, sisters, children, and grandchildren.

Lucknow returned to be the backdrop where the drama of Papa's life unfolded. He had old memories of his schooling in Lucknow and then his college days. He would, as he grew older, tell us stories of how he would slip out to see films with his cousins. Seats were very cheap, just 2 annas, he would tell us. His father lived in an extended family with his siblings and when he got a job with the British government, he and his siblings bought plots of land adjacent to each other, surrounding his ancestral home which was always referred to as Bara Ghar, the big house. It was in this house where Papa was probably born and grew up. All the surrounding houses were similar, with common walls and a central courtyard. The use of the rooms would change depending on the movement of the sun, and whether it was day or night, summer or winters. Our grandparents moved out of the ancestral house into a smaller house in this neighbourhood, fondly remembered by us as 96, Society Park. In this two-storied house all five siblings had their own room and a room to spare for guests. The baths and toilets were shared, the kitchen was a verandah that opened onto the courtyard.

Our grandparents lived there until they were old moved in with us. Every summer and winter vacation, we would go with our grandparents to Lucknow and spend our holidays there. The first floor had been rented out for safety and probably some pocket money for our grandparents. Our summer nights would be spent sleeping on the terrace and the preparations for this took a lot of time and effort. First the terrace was sprayed with water for cooling. Cots, stored in the barsati would be laid out and bedrolls unspread. Sometimes mosquito nets were put up with the help of bamboos. Small earthen pots of water would be filled and carried carefully up the stairs from the ground floor.

After dinner we would all clamber up and roll into our beds, chatting, and excited about seeing so many stars and sometimes fireflies. Our grandfather would sit and apply some

sort of mosquito repellent, maybe eucalyptus oil, to his body. We all giggled under our bedsheets as he vigorously covered his very large ears with the oil. Not all was rosy about sleeping in the terrace. For one thing, we had to wake up very early with the piercing rays of the morning sun and at other times had to rush downstairs if it rained. Only to go back up when it stopped, with the heat making it unbearable for us to sleep indoors. Lucknow is famous for mangoes and our staple diet as children was the assortment of local mangoes.

The house was a home to many people who came to Lucknow for work; my two uncles, some distant relatives, then my family and I, and finally our parents moved in there after retirement. During the happy times they spent there, the house would be alive with the sounds of grandchildren running around, laughing, playing, very much fulfilling its function of a large family house. During my stay here, my love for Lucknow took on professional overtones and I took it up as the topic of my dissertation for a PhD. For the first time I saw the history behind the city, with its lofty imambaras, mosques, and palaces. The story of the Nawabs and the development of the kingdom of Awadh kept me happily engaged for nearly two decades. In all my exploits, be they writing books, research, or taking people for endless heritage walks, Papa was always by my side. Through me he saw a new side of the city which he was associated with all his life.

Eventually the house became family to two brothers. Our parents lived on the first floor and our uncle's family lived on the ground floor. After the death of our uncle, Papa became the local guardian of our aunt. And they got cancer together. But never to shirk his responsibility, Papa would drive himself and our aunt, to the hospital for chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Despite our attempts to dissuade him, since his own health was frail and he was not getting any younger, he would take care of her every need, both personal and medical, always playing the concerned brother and oncologist. Having gone through all the stages of cancer, our aunt passed away at her daughter's home. The ground floor slowly changed from being part of a large lively family home to a deserted and unkept ruin.

The very steep stairs, maintenance of a large house, and the lack of proper manpower support was making living in the house difficult for the old couple. The open courtyard, which one had to cross during biting winters, sunny afternoons, and heavy rains, to reach the toilet increased the chances of falls and fractures. We started getting worried and tried

to persuade Papa to move into a smaller and more comfortable apartment with a lift. But he did not want to shift from the house which had been his home for nearly eight decades. It was only when one of his nieces, who had recently lost her husband, and was in need of money, broached the subject of selling the family house, that Papa relented. Selfless and caring, service now became his agenda. He moved into a smaller flat and with the help of my brother-in-law, completed the last rites of his parents by selling their family home and distributing the money to all his siblings and their families, as was proper. Characteristic of Papa, he ensured that no distinction was made between sons and daughters. Soon after the sale the house was completed, it was demolished and a new building would take its place. But Papa was not alive to see this. Moving out from the old family home was the beginning of his end.

GETTING ALL AFFAIRS IN ORDER

Papa was 84 and had battled cancer scientifically, diligently, and patiently for nearly twelve long years. When our parents moved into a smaller two bedroom flat, Papa was much weaker and seemed more vulnerable. We could see his energy depleting fast. His happy, confident, cheerful daughters now became conscious that the end was inevitable. He was not going to live forever; he had taught us that death is a part and parcel of life, but we didn't want him to suffer. He had also told us that the fourth and final stage of cancer is very painful and usually passed away in a coma induced by pain killers like morphine. We could tell he was scared of the end and the pain that would accompany it. We would call him every morning and then every evening, just to hear his voice to decipher his condition. If he was strong we were strong, if he was dejected, we were dejected.

Although Papa continued to work up to the last month before death, his daily schedule became sluggish, but always remained disciplined. He started sleeping alone on a bed in the living room. Because of the heavy doses of chemotherapy, he could no longer tolerate the heat of summers or the cold of the air conditioner. Amma, on the other hand, could not get any sleep if the room was not 'chilled'. So as to not to disturb her, Papa decided to sleep alone, a source of great worry to us all, in case he needed anything at night, but he was adamant. He would get up in the wee hours of the morning. We never really knew what he did in the mornings as we could never wake up at 4.00 am. But he said he did some free hand exercises. He would also potter around the kitchen, fill water bottles, water his plants, and make himself tea. He would make tea for anyone else who around or woke up in the morning. It is another matter that everyone refused to have the tea he made since it was mild, white, and did not taste like 'anything'! My husband commented that you could identify the denomination of a coin if it was lying at the bottom of the cup. When told, Papa would laugh like a child till tears ran down the side of his eyes.

Since he could no longer go for his long walks around the Lucknow zoo because of his failing health and its distance from the new house, he would walk around the new apartment grounds. Every day he helped a neighbour collect flowers for her daily worship, and soon befriended her. This neighbour would visit our parents every day in the morning,

and she ended up crying more than all of us at his funeral. Mother never really liked her and we would jokingly refer to her as 'Papa's girlfriend', which he never refuted, and annoyed mother even more. But she knew well that her husband was a favourite of many women, young and old. Back from the walk, he would eat a banana, for instant energy and potassium, he said. He would then hunt for his glasses and settle down with his newspaper. As he grew older, he seemed more and more agitated after reading the news and soon detached himself from it, reading only the headlines.

This, I observed, was his first step towards detachment. After the newspaper, he would browse through the magazines he had subscribed to, but would not read anything. His attention span was not good, and he could not concentrate for long - all, he rued, as being the result of his chemotherapy. He always sat in the well-lit sunny side of the room, with instrumental music playing in the background. He had collected hundreds of songs, Indian and western, all instrumental, which would play for hours. He loved the piano. The same music would play in his room in the hospital all day long, a welcome addition to the otherwise morose atmosphere of a cancer hospital! Whenever I visited, Papa would be ready with a pile of his files. He wanted me to go through all his papers and sort them out. He wanted to reduce his responsibilities and paperwork. Unwillingly, I would sit with him, as he meticulously examined every document, showed them to me if important, or threw them away if not. My self-appointed role of a son had come back to haunt me. I was always given the tough jobs, like this one, which my sisters daintily said, they could not do as it was too painful!

Together we sorted all the files; his financial files, property files, academic certificates, pension, medical, taxes, electricity, property tax, water tax, and the general miscellany of life. He also had a file in each of our names. Any paper related to us would be dutifully kept in the respective files. There were old photographs, albums, slides, projector, cameras, and tripod stands. Papa loved photography and was an avid traveller and photographer. All these had to disposed of; some given to family members, some to colleagues, the rest thrown away. Stationery had to be sorted. Medicine boxes had to be sorted. Books, magazines, subscriptions, bank accounts had to be collected, reviewed, and their fate decided upon. Slowly, in a matter of a year, his overflowing cupboard would be reduced to a handful of files and bank papers.

Mother would give him tea as he worked through his files. He would keep looking at his watch and would suddenly get up to shave and get dressed for work. He had now changed from his usually formal working clothes of trousers and jacket with tie, to informal chinos and shirts with walking shoes, and later leather slip-ons for ease. Going through his morning schedule and then getting ready for work was becoming more and more difficult and time consuming for him. But he would bravely go through the motions, sit at the dining table, fuss over the food, shifting it around his plate like a child, and had to be coaxed by us into finishing it. He would then show us the number of medicines he had to take every day. A part of his morning schedule was also to check the list of medicines prescribed to him and store them in small bottles for the day, lest he missed any of them. He had medicines for his disease, some for the side effects of these medicines, some for the side effects of the medicines for the first side effects, some to improve his immunity, some for the bad taste in his mouth, ulcers, and the list went on.

I had moved to Kolkata and whenever I went to Lucknow, I would accompany Papa to his hospital. When he was ready, having finished his breakfast, the driver would take his briefcase, water bottle, two snack boxes, and a flask with hot soup or cold lemonade. I would rush to have the lift open for him. He would then close the heavy doors, since they were mechanical, grumble at the lack of maintenance, and we would slowly make our way to work. He would first inspect the car, and admonish the driver if it was dirty. He was very fastidious about maintenance. He had once told an air hostess that the aircraft engine was making too much sound and needed to be oiled. My embarrassment was only abated by the sweet smile of the young woman, who assured him that they would look into the matter. Well, they were trained to be courteous and polite and had their share of odd travellers! Papa would sit in the front seat with the driver, refuse to wear a seat belt, and spend the entire trip to the hospital cursing other drivers and jay walkers. His driver usually joined him in his road rage and if things were better controlled on the road, the two of them would get down to cursing the politicians.

It was a short drive to the hospital and the driver would park the car right in front of the entry. Since Papa had become very weak, we had instructed the driver that he should accompany him down the steep ramp that led to his basement office. But Papa was more

worried about the car blocking the porch which would inconvenience other visitors, so he would insist the driver first park the car. He would then make his way slowly down the ramp with me in tow, when I accompanied him. His first job was to inspect the flower pots and see if they were watered. He would then look to see if any trash was lying around. The hospital staff could be seen hovering around to cross check if everything was in order. He hated dirty glass panes, and would always comment on the hand marks as he entered the hospital and instruct someone to come and wipe it with a duster. His favourite pastime when he came visiting us was to clean our glass panes! It was embarrassing and welcome at the same time, because that is a chore I hate.

He would greet all his staff on entering and look around where his patients were seated. It was an area I wanted to cross very fast because it had an antiseptic smell, it was decorated with ugly cancer posters, and housed patients with similar conditions. But Papa always stopped, checked to see if the air conditioning was working, the televisions were streaming the latest programmes, and everyone was happy. Whenever I grumbled, he would explain to me that the hospital and the staff's jobs were all dependent on the patients who came here for treatment and thus they needed to be well looked after. He would enter his chamber, which was a small room in a big radiotherapy unit. It had a small table and chair, an arm-chair that had been kept for his use, another table with an electric kettle, and a small area for the young physicist who assisted him. The latest computer, scanner, and printer were neatly arranged on the table.

Papa's assistant would come running and empty his 'goody bag'. Once Papa was seated, she would give him a glass of water and his medicines that he had brought from home. When Papa was in good health, he would always make tea and invite all his colleagues, all much younger than us, doctors, pathologists and accountants. They would sit and chat about the hospital and make merry before starting their day's work. Needless to say, Papa was a very popular, respected, and loved senior in the hospital. After his death, his photo adorned the patients' area with the caption 'Father of the Department.' But latterly he would order coffee, potato chips, and biscuits for me and the others who came to visit, from the hospital cafeteria. He would always check the expiry dates, the condition of the crockery, and the seals of the mineral water. Why? Because, the hospital staff and patients used this cafeteria. We grew up to learn that all this was part of a professional's job profile.

As we had our coffee, Papa would have his snacks and juice brought from home and sign the necessary papers that were put before him by the never ending stream of people. Once done, we would get down to the business of wrapping up his life. He would sort files, hard copies and soft copies, separate the private stuff from official matters and delete all irrelevant material, the private stuff included. He had an excellent filing system and I learnt much doing this. He would then empty out his drawers and have me sort and clean them. It was nearly a year later that he passed away, but he had started preparing well in advance. I was amazed to see his composure at the acceptance of death as the final frontier. He was never taken by surprise in life, always well prepared for any eventuality, and he was not going to be unprepared for death. Only after two or three hours would get tired, and lie down in the arm-chair and instruct me from there. On our way back, we would go to the various Banks, and I would be sent to each one to close accounts, change them to Amma's name, add a nominee, or organise the fixed deposits for the ease of use by my mother.

He was very concerned about Amma's well-being and would keep calculating how much she would get after he died. It would be extremely depressing for us, but he would make me go through his pension papers, funds, policies, fixed assets, again and again and again. How I wished I had a caring husband like my Papa! Since he handled all the finances and medical issues, he now took it upon himself to train Amma. He would make her sit down every morning, with the financial file and the medical file. It was strange to watch a very irritated wife and a very adamant husband go through the ordeal of posthumous preparations. This was the outcome of being married for nearly fifty-five years! Soon the fights would shift to clothes. Papa had decided that since he was going to die soon, it was a waste to buy or wear new clothes, leaving my mother infuriated.

But he came down to the very basics; be it clothes, paperwork, or other articles of use. All the money and fixed assets were made out in my mother's name. He was free of any worldly responsibility. The only thing that kept him back was the sale of his family house. With the help of my brother-in-law, the house was sold and the proceedings were duly distributed. The occasion was marked by parties since all the family members gathered and sat around laughing and chatting, with a content Papa looking on. This would the last

goodbyes that he would say. But he was happy, having completed the last duty of a loving son, brother, and uncle.

And then it happened. Papa came home from hospital and fell down in the bathroom. He was lifted bodily and placed on the bed. My sisters came down. Papa told them he had got a morphine patch to ease the increasing pain in his body. Matter of factly. Who told you to? Why didn't you ask us? We were really shocked. He told us he had consulted his oncologist and my brother-in-law, an anaesthetist. My sister, a dental surgeon, got very angry. Why didn't you ask us? He looked her straight in the eyes and said, do you know more than me and the doctors in this case? Do you have to bear the pain? Do you know how bad this will become? Do you know how much I am suffering? I called him from Kolkata. How are you Papa? I am bad, very bad, beta. Shocked at hearing him talk like that, I tried to humour him. But he seriously replied 'From now on it is better you call Amma. I am not in a good condition.'

I flew to Lucknow immediately. Papa insisted he be dressed so that he could receive me at the airport. My sister video-taped his adamant request, until I called back and assured him I would be all right, even though it was the first time he would not be standing at the airport, or station, waiting for me. I reached home to find my father in bed, as usual lying diagonally, propped up with two pillows, a small portion of his feet dangling out as if ready to get up any minute, lazily watching some repeat telecast of some old programmes. A smile hovered on his lips as he saw me and he apologised profusely since he could not receive me at the airport. I went up and snuggled up to him, resting my head on his folded arm, as he held me close to his body. He told me he was not well and felt quite weak and could not even go to the hospital, a rare occurrence, since he had attended hospital all through his chemotherapy.

Along with my mother, and two sisters, we pampered Papa and tried to feed him this and that, all aware of the elephant in the room, but no one really wanted to talk about it. In cancer patient treatment, morphine is the last resort, more to ease the pain which a patient is ridden with, rather than a cure. Morphine, being highly addictive, is not used lightly since it cannot be withdrawn; as the patient becomes immune to its power, it is gradually

increased in potency to have the same effect. Papa had decided to call it a day and had accepted his terminal condition; we were not quite as ready.

We argued amongst ourselves, discussed other options, especially of aggressive medical treatments that included hospitalisation, surgery, and could result in the use of artificial methods of feeding and breathing. But all his life, Papa had advised against aggressive treatment in the last stages and suggested palliative care at home, which is less financially draining for the family and more comforting for the patient. He felt that since no treatment could cure stage four cancer, why waste money on it? That money could be used by the family after his death. He also wanted to breathe his last conscious breath, surrounded by the loving presence of his family, in familiar surroundings, rather than as a vegetable on a hospital bed. But hospitalisation could extend his life by a few weeks, even months, and we wanted to take that chance.

This called for a family meeting and the agenda was to take a call on palliative care versus hospitalisation. Only blood relations attended this meeting which included his children and grandchildren, all adults now. The issue was discussed and surprisingly, the grandchildren decided that Nana's last wish of palliative care should be honoured. We were being selfish in hospitalising him as we couldn't let him go, because he would be unconscious anyway. We asked our mother separately, and although she sat in the meeting, she was composed as she took her decision of letting Papa go, painlessly, at home, as he had wished.

My elder sister, a dental surgeon, and her husband, an anaesthesiologist, played a vital role beyond this point. Doctors from palliative care counselled our family and explained to us what to do and what to expect. This could go on for days, weeks, months even. The dosage of the morphine patch, how it was to be monitored, increased or regulated. All cancer medication and other life-sustaining drugs for diabetes, blood pressure, multi-vitamins, etc. had to be withdrawn. Food and water were to be given when the 'patient' asked for it. A heart monitor was installed to check his vitals, and since the Cancer patch was found in his lungs, and respiratory problems were expected, a stand-by oxygen cylinder was placed near his bed.

BEGINNING OF THE END

Week 1: Papa's condition seemed to improve as soon as he stopped taking his medicines. His skin that had become blackish and sensitive to touch started glowing. His vitals became better. His blood pressure became normal as did his sugar levels, both of which had changed for the worse after chemotherapy. Except for general weakness and drowsiness due to the morphine, he was in good cheer. All our family and friends came from far and near to be with him, meet him, talk to him and he gracefully and contentedly played the perfect host. We tried to keep his room spotlessly clean; bright with fresh and scented flowers, diffused with scented candles; light instrumental music playing in the background. Some people suggested that we play the scriptures for him for the safe passage of his soul, but a strict non-believer, he would get very irritated so we reverted back to his own collection of romantic songs. We kept his clothes and bedclothes squeaking fresh. Since he could no longer go to the bathroom, our family members took turns in changing his diapers, always joking with him how the tables had turned from when he would change our diapers!

Week 2: Papa had become weaker, and his food intake had decreased considerably. Most of the day he lay in a semi-conscious state, becoming alert only when it was time for my sisters to visit him in the morning and evening. He would sometimes watch the television but we could see that he could no longer comprehend what was happening. Many times he would fiddle with his phone, as if to read his messages, before giving up. His voice had lost its strength and more and more he used sign language to communicate. He no longer liked meeting people, except his immediate family members. He would constantly seek out the company of his three daughters. We spent days, holding his hands, which he would playfully squeeze to indicate how strong he still was, and then smile in glee. We kept up the schedule although one of us had to now sleep with him at night in case he fell off the bed. The nocturnal grandchildren took turns in sleeping at night. We even kept a male nurse to help us. However, we were also aware of a sense of fatigue setting in for us, which made us feel doubly sad and guilty. We couldn't put our Papa in an old peoples' home.

Week 3: Papa had lost a lot of weight and refused to eat. Nevertheless, we insisted on feeding him, and after one such instance he vomited everything and the doctors warned us that this may lead to asphyxiation. They also told us that that as the disease takes over the body, and it is no longer able to cope with the bodily functions, it starts rejecting food and shutting down, one organ at a time, the kidneys being the last to shut down. We now increased his intake of water, using a sterile dropper with ganga jal (water from the river Ganga), which is supposed to take you to heaven. Some people suggested that we stop this water too as it may unnecessarily extend his life, but after the explosive reactions of some family members, this idea was dropped. Papa was quite weak now and not coherent. Although his vitals were good, and he did not need oxygen at all, the doctors said that probably his restlessness was due to rising urea levels and low mineral levels. We gave him coconut water for the minerals, but since he was not being given any medicines, it was suggested that he be given some sedatives to restrain his movements. The job of injecting sedatives fell on my sister which she did everyday, bravely, barring the first day. The first jab left a dark blood clot. As my nephew, a young doctor, was hunting for the medicine to apply on it, Papa corrected him, half asleep, and said he should look for Thrombophob gel!

Third last Day: Papa's body had been reduced to bones. With bolsters supporting him on either side, we kept him on clean disposable sheets, always on the look out for bed sores. Once, as his leg rested on the other for a whole day, sores developed on either side which had to be nursed every day. After that we were very careful and turned him every hour or so. We kept him covered with his favourite light yellow silk sheet. He looked like a yogi, lying peacefully in the subdued light and cool room. It was decided that this could take longer than expected so some members who had flown in from outside returned to work. Only I stayed back. I still played with him. I would squeeze his palm and he would squeeze back, but it was just a hint that I could get.

Second last Day: Since Papa was in a near semi-coma, and not conscious, my sisters and me started to plan ahead. Our mother was very tired, having nursed Papa now for over seven years, and in the recent days, she was not capable of caring for him any longer. We couldn't stop work and stay forever. Papa was otherwise comfortable, but he kept complaining of bowel problems. My sister and I decided to go to an old peoples' home, hoping to get a nurse to help Papa. We were split between duty, love, and reality. We spent

the rest of the day, and night, searching for ‘death’ and its symptoms. How long does it take for a person to survive without food and water? What does death look like? How will we know? What are the signs? It is surprisingly how much information the internet has and how morbid our thinking can become.

Last Day: It was like another day. The nurse was to come from the old peoples’ home. We sent the car with the driver to get her. After her arrival Papa looked quite relieved. It seemed now that his life energy could move freely. We settled Papa and after dropping back the nurse, I went to meet an old friend, only to be called back. Papa, was breathing heavily, gasping, with a hollow sound coming from his chest. Although we had spent hours reading about it, I could not relate it to death. We called our sister and waited in the other rooms. The attendant called us and said something was not right. Papa was lying very straight, hands on his side, and breathing hard. I pressed his palms, there was no response. He was slipping away, for the first time in unconsciousness. And then all of a sudden, he shuddered, and lay still. Straight legs, straight arms, head in the middle of the pillows, like a corpse; the face calm and contented, as if in deep sleep.

On the third day, as is customary, a memorial service was organised for him, not in a temple, or a prayer hall, but in a fine hotel, with good food and music. The room quickly filled up with friends, family, and most importantly his hospital colleagues; doctors, nurses, ward boys, all who called him the ‘Father of Radiology.’ He had also, recently been felicitated by the award as the longest serving Physicist, who also battled cancer for twelve long years, being diagnosed at a secondary stage, objectively treated himself through the tertiary, and called it a day, voluntarily, on the fourth and last stage. His life is an inspiration to many in the field of cancer, both as a service provider and as a patient.

THE PAIN OF LOSS

Soon after Amma left the apartment she had shared with Papa and moved in with my elder sister. We were quite surprised, even shocked, by her decision, which seemed rather arbitrary to us. We always felt our mother was very independent and would be comfortable alone. Marriages that last for six decades have a way of camouflaging the personalities of the partners. Without Papa, Amma was a completely different person. We were under the impression that she was the strong person, who kept the home together, but seeing her helpless and disoriented without him, we found her to be 'weak' and 'dependent', unable to fend for herself. Papa's personality could now only be recreated by the loss of its presence in Amma.

We also realized Amma was not so much broken, as tired, after Papa's death. Eight years of hand and foot service and being the primary care giver to a cancer patient, had taken a toll on her health. Instead of our mother, we saw an old, haggard, woman with multiple health problems, which had gone unnoticed due to the pressing medical needs of our Papa. Later, seeing from her point of view, her decision not to stay alone, seemed reasonable. Although the only reason she gave us was that since childhood, she had stayed in a large family, and was scared to live alone.

We spent a short two years, after the passing away of Papa, seeing her in a totally new light. We saw her for who she really was, as a person. Her likes, her dislikes, her mannerisms, her love for clothes and jewellery, her fetish for food, her well organized cupboards, and her friendship with many. Under the loving care of my sister, she regained her health. Her skin started to glow again and her carefully chosen sarees and matching jewels brought back color to her cheeks. She smiled often and busily went about her day with her many hobbies, most of which included reading, writing, talking to family members, 'machining' as she called stitching, and watching television. She would spend a great amount of time making kitchen accessories like table mats, napkins, bags, etc. She would then give these as presents, which were much appreciated, since her work was immaculate and tastefully done.

However, as much as she tried to keep her spirits up, loneliness caught up with her and she started missing Papa. And about time, we secretly thought! Her pragmatic and spiritual approach to life had made her much stronger than most women, and she was not one to cry or make a fuss, for something which was inevitable. She soon came to terms with her ageing self, and started to lose interest in worldly life. More and more of her time was now spent alone, in spiritual practices. She became withdrawn and silent. We would see her engaged with wrapping up her life, which meant distributing her material possessions, finishing half written pieces, compiling her diary which she wrote everyday; in short 'clearing her desk'. We felt sad and tried hard to engage her, but found little that could interest her. Then the pandemic struck and put us all in lock down. We interacted like everyone else, through phone, Whatsapp and Zoom calls.

After the first wave, I went to meet her. She was quiet, withdrawn, but content and happy. This was to be my last meeting with her. When I left, she gave me a tight hug. If you knew my mother, this was a rare pleasure! Soon after the second wave hit Lucknow. Seventeen of our immediate family were hit, including Amma. She made her last journey to the hospital, alone, in an ambulance. None of us could accompany her. She was admitted to a single room. Our mother, who was scared to be alone, never had to do her work herself, always served by a multitude of servants, pampered by her husband and children, was being asked to fend for herself.

Three days was all she could take of this misery. She would call my elder sister, and beg her to take her home, making promises like small children, that she would maintain proper distancing and quarantine rules. Both of them cried, and both knew it was not possible. My younger sister and myself looked on, heartbroken. Amma soon realized she could not go home, and took the decision in her hands. She forced the doctors to call my sister, and demanded her life saving oxygen mask be removed, and she be allowed to breathe naturally, and slowly pass away.

In lock down, we three sisters sat in counsel. Amma said she wanted to be released. Were we ready to let her go? But she insisted and promised that we would meet on the 'other' side. Her spiritual training had strengthened her belief that her 'Baba' was waiting for her on the other side, and she would be in good hands. She was not afraid to die. But she was

afraid to stay alone. We succumbed. It was oddly reassuring to think Papa was waiting for her on the 'other' side and that they would be together, again.

Her last mortal journey was in a black bag, driven down to the cremation ground, and laid on a pyre along with 25 other pyres. Our young nephew, complete in a PPE suit, was again asked to perform the last rites. My two sisters watched through their car windows. Security was tight and laws were stringent. I joined in spirit and imagined the heat and loss through a few Whatsapp photos shared by others. In the heat of Lucknow summers, my mother, scared of being alone, loved and pampered by family, never exposed to a minute in the hot afternoon, had to go alone, and none of us could hold her hand and bid her goodbye, and tell her that we loved her, and were so sorry we could not serve her when she needed us the most. Two deaths. One life.

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Neeta Das is a conservation architect and an architectural historian. A prolific writer, she has authored and co-authered many books on architectural history, theory, and conservation. This is her first non technical book, a memoir, where she uses her witing skills to grieve and deal with the double loss of her parents to cancer and covid.